

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY ROME

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1543

INFO DIA

USMISSION NATO

AMEMBASSY ANKARA

AMEMBASSY ATHENS

AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

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AMEMBASSY OTTAWA

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY REYKJAVIK

AMCONGEN MILAN

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 8480

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, IT

SUBJECT: ITALIAN ELECTIONS: WHITHER OR WITHER THE CENTER-LEFT

SUMMARY: THE JUNE 15-16 REGIONAL AND LOCAL ELECTIONS IN ITALY ARE SEEN AS A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE IN THE CENTER-LEFT COALITION THAT HAS GOVERNED ITALY SINCE 1962 AND ON THE BALANCE OF POWER (SOCIALISTS VERSUS CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS(

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WITHIN THAT COALITION. THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN HAS FOCUSED

ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY ON NATIONAL ISSUES (GOVERNMENTAL INEFFICIENCY AND CORRUPTION, LAW AND ORDER, AND THE COMMUNIST AND SOCIALIST "ALTERNATIVES"). MANY ITALIANS HAVE READ LAST YEAR'S SURPRISINGLY LARGE REFERENDUM VOTE IN FAVOR OF DIVORCE AND CURRENT DISCONTENT ON BREAD AND BUTTER ISSUES AND GOVERNMENTAL PERFORMANCE AS AN INDICATION THAT THE ITALIAN PEOPLE ARE READY FOR A SUBSTANTIAL CHANGE. SUCH A CHANGE WOULD BE A DRAMATIC DEPARTURE FROM THE UNIQUE STABILITY OF ITALIAN VOTING PATTERNS SINCE WORLD WAR II.

MOST OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT THE OVERALL VOTE FOR THE CENTER-LEFT PARTIES WILL NOT SHOW SUBSTANTIAL CHANGE. HOWEVER, IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT THERE WILL BE AN OVERALL SHIFT TO THE LEFT WITH THE SMALL RIGHT-OF-CENTER PARTIES DECLINING AND THE COMMUNISTS GAINING IN THE PROBABLE AREA BETWEEN 1 AND 2 PERCENT WITH THE UNLIKELY POSSIBILITY OF AS HIGH AS 3 PER CENT. WITHIN THE CENTER-LEFT COALITION, CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS ARE COMMONLY EXPECTED TO LOSE 2 TO 3 PERCENT OF THE OVERALL VOTE WITH THE SOCIALISTS GAINING AN EQUAL OR SLIGHTLY LARGER PERCENTAGE. SUCH A CHANGE WOULD ALTER THE BALANCE OF POWER WITHIN THE COALITION. THE EXTENT OF THIS LATTER CHANGE WILL BE A MAJOR DETERMINANT IN POST-ELECTORAL PARTY DECISIONS ON WHEN AND HOW TO RE-FORM A CENTER-LEFT COALITION AND, AT THE EXTREME, ON THE POSSIBILITY OF EARLY NATIONAL ELECTIONS.

END SUMMARY.

1. THE JUNE 15-16 REGIONAL AND LOCAL ELECTIONS IN ITALY HAVE RECEIVED MORE ATTENTION IN ITALY AND ABROAD THAN ELECTIONS OF THIS CHARACTER WOULD NORMALLY WARRANT. THERE ARE SEVERAL REASONS: ALL OF THE ITALIAN PARTIES HAVE CONDUCTED THEIR CAMPAIGN ON FUNDAMENTAL NATIONAL POLITICAL ISSUES AND, THUS, THE ELECTION IS SEEN AS A TEST OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES ON

- (1) THE PERFORMANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY (DC) WHICH HAS DOMINATED ITALIAN GOVERNMENTS FOR ALMOST 30 YEARS;
- (2) THE DESIRABILITY OF A GREATER ROLE FOR THE COMMUNIST PARTY (PCI) IN ITALIAN GOVERNMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, AND
- (3) THE FORTUNES OF THE SOCIALIST PARTY (PSI) WHICH, ALMOST UNINTERRUPTEDLY SINCE 1962, HAS PARTICIPATED AS A JUNIOR MEMBER IN NATIONAL CENTER-LEFT COALITIONS.

2. MORE SPECIFICALLY, IT IS A TEST FOR THE CENTER-LEFT

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FORMULA, WHICH HAS BEEN UNDER INCREASING STRAINS OVER THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS. IN THE EVENT OF HEAVY VOTE SHIFTS, PARTICULARLY IN MAJOR URBAN AREAS, TRADITIONALLY CENTER-LEFT ADMINISTRATIONS SUCH AS THE LIGURIAN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT OR THE CITY OF FLORENCE COULD SWITCH TO A LEFTIST FORMULA DOMINATED BY THE PCI. A SHIFT TO A LEFTIST GOVERNMENT IN LIGURIA WOULD EXTEND THE "RED BELT" OF PCI CONTROLLED REGIONS IN CENTRAL ITALY FROM 3 TO 4. IT IS UNLIKELY THAT DC EXPECTED LOSSES IN SOME

LARGER URBAN AREAS WILL BE REFLECTED IN THE CUNTRYSIDE. IN OTHER IMPORTANT CENTERS, LIKE NAPLES, AND IN MANY SMALLER COMMUNES, THE CENTER-LEFT PARTIES MAY LOSE THEIR THIN MAJORITY WITH NO ALTERNATIVE COALITION FEASIBLE. LOCAL INSTABILITY OF THIS SORT WOULD FURTHER EXACERBATE TENSIONS AMONG THE CENTER-LEFT PARTIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL.

3. MANY IMPONDERABLES MAKE RELIABLE PREDICTIONS ON THE OUTCOME OF THE JUNE 15-16 VOTE IMPOSSIBLE. THESE INCLUDE: UNCERTAINTY REGARDING THE ORIENTATION OF THE NEWLY ENFRANCHISED 18-YEAR-OLD VOTERS, THE ABSENCE OF ANY RELIABLE AND COMPREHENSIVE PRE-ELECTORAL POLLS, AND THE FOCUS OF THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN ON NATIONAL POLITICAL ISSUES RATHER THAN LOCAL ONES.

4. THIS SAID, THE EMBASSY OFFERS THE FOLLOWING "GUESSTIMATES" ON THE VOTE RESULT BASED ON EMBASSY AND CONSTITUENT POST SOUNDINGS. (COMPARISONS ARE TO RESULTS IN 1972 ELECTIONS IN 15 REGIONS WHICH ARE VOTING JUNE 15-16).

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--CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS (DC - 28.5 0/0 OF VOTE IN 1972):
EXPECTED TO LOSE TO THE LEFT AND PICK UP PART OF THIS LOSS
FROM THE RIGHT; LIKELIHOOD OF LOSSES IN MAJOR URBAN CENTERS;
EXPECTED DROP OF 2 TO 3 PERCENTAGE POINTS.
--SOCIALISTS (PSI - 9.8 0/0 OF VOTE IN 1972): HIGH
EXPECTATIONS FROM TOUGH CAMPAIGN AGAINST DC; EXPECTED TO
PICK UP LARGE PORTION OF DC LOSSES FOR GAIN OF 2 TO 4 0/0.
--COMMUNISTS (PCI - 28.3 0/0 OF VOTE IN 1972):
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EFFECTIVE, GRASS ROOTS CAMPAIGN ORGANIZATION FOCUSED ON
DC GOVERNMENTAL INEFFICIENCY AND CORRUPTION; POSSIBLY HURT
BY PORTUGUESE EVENTS AND FOCUS OF PUBLIC ATTENTION ON PSI-
DC DEBATE; A LIKELY GAIN WOULD BE IN AREA OF FROM 1 TO 2 0/0,
YET A GAIN AS HIGH AS 3 0/0 CANNOT BE TOTALLY DISCOUNTED.
-- FAR RIGHT (8 0/0 OF 1972 VOTE) AND LIBERALS (3.9 0/0 OF
1972 VOTE); THE FAR RIGHT (MSI) EXPECTED TO DROP IN MOST
AREAS WITH VOTES GOING TO DC OR , IN CERTAIN DEPRESSED
AREAS, LEAPFROGGING TO PCI. SMALL, CONSERVATIVE LIBERAL
PARTY GENERALLY EXPECTED TO CONTINUE GRADUAL DECLINE.
--SOCIAL DEMOCRATS (PSDI - 5.2 0/0 OF 1972 VOTE) AND
REPUBLICANS (PRI - 2.9 0/0 OF 1972 VOTE): SOCIAL DEMOCRATS
GENERALLY EXPECTED TO HOLD STEADY OR ADVANCE MODERATELY.
SMALL REPUBLICAN PARTY SHOULD GAIN SOMEWHAT DESPITE ABSENCE
OF PARTY SENIOR STATESMAN LA MALFA FROM MOST OF CAMPAIGN.
PROLETARIAN UNIT PARTY (PDUP - EXTREME LEFT FRINGE
PARTY FORMED AFTER 1972 ELECTIONS, UNITED WITH MANIFESTO
GROUP IN 1974); EXPECTED TO ATTRACT LARGELY YOUTH VOTES
TO LEFT OF PCI; POSSIBLY TOTAL VOTE OF 2 TO 3 0/0 EXPTECTED TO
COME MAINLY FROM NORTHERN URBAN AREAS.

5. THERE APPEARS TO BE LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE JUNE 15-16
ELECTIONS WILL PRODUCE A SHIFT TO THE LEFT. THE MAIN
QUESTION IS "HOW MUCH?" THE ANSWER WILL HAVE A MAJOR EFFECT
ON POST-ELECTORAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AT THE NATIONAL
LEVEL. TWO PRINCIPAL SCENARIOS ARE THE MOST PROBABLE:
(A) IF DC LOSSES AND PSI-PCI GAINS ARE RELATIVELY
MODEST, IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT THE MORO GOVERNMENT WILL
NOT BE BROUGHT DOWN IN THE IMMEDIATE POST-ELECTORAL PERIOD.
WITH OR WITHOUT A GOVERNMENT RESHUFFLE, MORO MIGHT BE

ALLOWED TO CARRY ON UNTIL THE EXPECTED CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT AND SOCIALIST PARTY CONGRESSES THIS FALL. IF THE DC AND PSI COULD NOT THEN AGREE ON A NEW RELATIONSHIP IN THE LIGHT OF THE REGIONAL ELECTION VOTE, THE CHANCES FOR EARLY NATIONAL ELECTIONS (BEFORE 1977) WOULD INCREASE.

(B) THE MOST DESTABILIZING RESULT WOULD BE A MAJOR GAIN BY THE PSI EVEN IN THE FACT OF CONTAINED DC LOSSES. THE PSI WOULD THEN BE LIKELY TO DEMAND FROM THE DC A PRICE THE LATTER WOULD BE UNWILLING TO PAY. THIS WOULD MAKE A SERIOUS GOVERNMENT CRISIS ALMOST INEVITABLE BY THE FALL, AND EARLY NATIONAL ELECTIONS POSSIBLE BY NEXT SPRING.
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INDEED, FOR THE SOCIALISTS THE TEMPTATION TO TRY TO FORCE EARLY NATIONAL ELECTIONS TO BRING PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION INTO LINE WITH THE NEW BALANCE OF FORCES THEY WOULD PERCEIVE IN THE COUNTRY MIGHT WELL-PROVE IRRESISTIBLE. HOWEVER, NO OTHER MAJOR PARTY IS LIKELY TO BE ENTHUSIASTIC FOR EARLY NATIONAL ELECTIONS.

(C) THE REMAINING HYPOTHETICAL ALTERNATIVE OF A DC-COMMUNIST ACCORD OVER THE HEADS OF THE PSI APPEARS EXTREMELY IMPROBABLE AT THIS STAGE.

6. TYPICALLY, ELECTORAL CHANGE IN ITALY HAS PROCEEDED AT A "GLACIAL PACE." THESE ELECTIONS MAY PROVE NO EXCEPTION, NO CLEAR-CUT RESULT MAY EMERGE, AND THINGS MAY GO ON SUBSTANTIALLY AS BEFORE EXCEPT FOR INEVITABLE INCREASED STRAINS WITHIN THE CENTER-LEFT COALITION. IF, HOWEVER, THE ELECTION RESULTS SHOW A SUBSTANTIAL SHIFT TO THE LEFT, THE SOCIALISTS ARE LIKELY TO PRESS FOR A NOTABLY LARGER PIECE OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENTAL ACTION. A LARGE COMMUNIST GAIN WOULD PROBABLY RESULT IN INCREASED PRESSURE FOR A NEW DC-PCI RELATIONSHIP (SHORT OF COMMUNIST PARTICIPATION IN THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT). INTERNAL BALANCES WITHIN THE DC WOULD ALSO BE AFFECTED. AT BEST, A NEW CENTER-LEFT, MORE LEFT THAN CENTER, WOULD EMERGE. AT WORST, POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND EARLY ELECTIONS UNDER UNFAVORABLE CONDITIONS FOR THE MODERATE PARTIES WOULD RESULT. VOLPE

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